

Access to English

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

Two years ago, Hina Saifi, 15, daughter of a fruit vendor, could hardly form an English sentence. But here she was, without notes, addressing a crowd of 150 in fluent English. "Here I am, a young, confident girl with a bright future," she said during her eight-minute speech. Next, she chatted with Ambassador David C. Mulford about her recent three-week stay in the United States and then gave an off-the-cuff interview, in English, to a camera crew from Asian News International.

Saifi represents the first generation in her family to go to school. What's changed her life and her prospects is the State Department English Access Microscholarship Program, which has been empowering non-elite 14- to 18-year-olds around the world to learn English through an interactive, student-centered method that produces immediate results. The aim of the two-year program is to provide these young

people with the language skills they need to enter university and to begin careers in the international marketplace.

The program also trains teachers, provides American-style materials and gives aid to schools to develop methods of active learning, rather than rote memorization and drills. "I give all credit to my teachers," Saifi said in her speech to fellow graduates, teachers, parents and American diplomats on the lawns of Roosevelt House, the Ambassador's residence in New Delhi. She and her classmates at the Jamia Secondary School went to nearby Jamia Millia Islamia to take two hours of Access lessons three days a week. They made collages and then described the pictures, they sang jingles and translated Bollywood hits into English. Saifi said it was so much fun

she wanted to stay in class each day and keep learning. "We worked on vocabulary, grammar and especially our pronunciation," she said. Saifi and a classmate, Taqdees Anjum, became so proficient that they were selected for a three-week stay in the United States last summer. "I was given an opportunity to see the land of my dreams," visiting Washington, D.C., Chicago and San Francisco, said Saifi. "I lived with an American host family and that was the best part." Other Access students from Chennai and New Delhi passed written and oral exams that allowed them to attend high school for a year in the United States, as part of the YES youth exchange program of the State Department.

Since the Access program start-

ed in 2004, it has benefited 1,265 students in New Delhi, Jammu, Ahmedabad, Calcutta, Trivandrum and Chennai. There are 730 enrolled now in India, among 10,000 students in Access programs in 45 countries.

Saifi was part of a class of 114 students from the New Delhi program who received completion certificates at the Roosevelt House event on November 17, then showed off their skills, chatting with Ambassador Mulford about the details of the new U.S.-India civilian nuclear agreement and trading favorite poems with his wife, Jeannie. Students in Calcutta and Chennai have also completed the two-year course.

"You are the first batch in India,

the pioneers if you will, of this very ambitious worldwide initiative," Ambassador Mulford told the students. "Because of your dedication and your success in reading, writing and speaking English, students from disadvantaged communities, perhaps a year or two younger than yourselves, now want to join Access classes and improve their own lives and prospects."

While India has more English speakers than the United States and the United Kingdom combined, sustained, quality, English-language instruction is still not available to many segments of Indian society. Access gives more young people a chance to learn a skill that is vital to succeeding in the world today.

"All of you will need good

Above left: Jeannie Mulford smiles as Access graduates Hina Saifi and Shadab Nazmi chat with Ambassador David C. Mulford. In the background is Jamia Millia Islamia Registrar S.M. Afzal. Above: Hina Saifi gives an interview in English.

Below: The Access graduates from Jamia Secondary School with the Ambassador and his wife at Roosevelt House, their New Delhi home.

English to fill out a college application form and, very soon after that, a job application and take part in an interview," the Ambassador said. "Above all, finish your education," he urged. "Don't let this English language drop from your vocabulary. It will serve you well."



For more information: <http://exchanges.state.gov/education/engteaching/access.htm>

